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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT SUMMONS MINISTERS TO REPORT ON REFUGEE ISSUES IN PAKISTAN

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On November 16, the Wolesi Jirga, Parliament's lower house, summoned Kabir Farahi, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), and Abdul Karim Barahowie, Minister of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), to brief Members of Parliament (MPs) on the planned closure of Durgai (aka Zangal Patai) refugee camp in Malakand District and the alleged mistreatment of Afghans in Pakistan. After a spirited discussion, the Ministers were tasked to report to Parliament within one week on their plan to engage the Government of Pakistan (GoP) on these issues. On November 23, the Minister of MoRR reported that Pakistani authorities agreed not to close Durgai camp and that the residents would be allowed to stay until spring 2010. The Deputy Minister of MoFA reported that the Pakistani authorities are abiding by their obligations with respect to registered Afghan refugees.
END SUMMARY.

Refugee Camp Closure

12. (SBU) MPs were puzzled about the proposed closures of Durgai camp if the camp was legal and were especially troubled because of the possibility of force return to Afghanistan. Refugee camp representatives attending the Parliament session needed information to take back to the residents. Minister Barahowie of the MoRR proceeded to thank Pakistan and Iran for hosting a large number of Afghans refugees for the past 30 years and noted that the GoP cannot deport a refugee holding a valid Proof of Registration card (PoR). He also reported on his November 15 meeting with the representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), resulting in a UNHCR visit to Pakistan on November 16 and 17. (Comment: On his return to Kabul, the UNHCR representative reported to Embassy Refugee Coordinator that the camp in Malakand Division, North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), was insecure with ongoing fighting and that local Pakistanis were also being moved out of the area. There is a feasible relocation site and negotiations continue on delaying any return movement until next spring. End Comment).

13. (SBU) MPs expressed concern that the MoRR claims to be prepared to receive refugee returnees, but there is no plan in place for a crisis. They noted that a permanent solution for returnees requires a plan and strategy that MoRR has not provided. In addition, the current lives of refugees in Pakistan and Iran are far better than the lives of returnees. Steps must be taken to keep Afghans in Afghanistan and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) must start thinking about projects to create jobs.

14. (SBU) Barahowie told the MPs that there are 59 MoRR townships in 34 provinces to which refugees can return, but only fourteen sites are active and MoRR has limited support for these Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) sites. MPs responded that land alone cannot solve all the problems faced by returnees and that they need access to health care,

education, and employment. MPs again noted that a clear strategy is needed for returnees, with MoRR's responsibilities and programs defined. (Comment: Many of the LAS sites designated by MoRR are remote and lack infrastructure, potable water, and economic opportunities, thus making it difficult to support returnees. End Comment).

Alleged Mistreatment of Afghans in Pakistan

¶15. (SBU) The MPs spoke of the illegal arrest of Afghans in Pakistan and increased police harassment. Minister Farahi of the MoFA responded that insecurity in Pakistan increases violation of Afghan refugee rights because they are a soft target for Pakistan police. (Comment: Per the UNHCR representative, PoR holders who are arrested are usually released quite rapidly, demonstrating the usefulness of the card as a protection tool. He also noted that there is no sign of large scale deportation despite the fact that there are large numbers of Afghans without documents in Pakistan. End Comment).

Next Steps

¶16. (U) After thanking the MPs for their participation, Speaker Qanuni noted that a clear strategy is needed to solve the problems of Afghan refugees and returnees. He tasked the ministers to contact their counterparts in the GoP to (a) delay the closure of the refugee camp and (b) call a

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tripartite commission meeting to discuss illegal arrests of Afghans. (Comment: The UNCHR representative shared a readout of his visit to Pakistan with both ministers. End Comment).

One Week Later

¶17. (U) Barahawie of the MoRR stated that an agreement was reached with GoP authorities not to close the refugee camp in NWFP. Water and electricity, which had been cut off, were again available. The residents have not been asked to repatriate and will be permitted to stay until spring 2010.

¶18. (U) Farahi detailed MoFA's contacts with the GoP, UNHCR authorities and officials in Kabul and Islamabad. He highlighted the fact that the GoP is abiding by its obligations to registered Afghan refugees. He also announced that there would be a Tripartite Commission meeting of the GOIRoA, GoP and UNHCR within in a month to conclude an extension of the Tripartite Agreement. (Comment: The current Tripartite Agreement expires on December 31 and, per UNHCR, negotiations on the draft text of the proposed new agreement are ongoing in Kabul and Islamabad. End Comment).

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